

# St Ninians by Stirling: a fragment of an early Scottish minster kirk?

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It has been a subject of comment that early Christian Scotland differed from Ireland, among many other respects, in the almost complete absence of round towers; Scotland's only two surviving round towers, it is well known, are at Brechin and Abernethy. Ireland, by contrast, has nearly 100. There is, however, a small group of tall square towers, probably mostly of eleventh- and early twelfth-century date, in east central Scotland, which would similarly have been prominent prestigious buildings and in which bells could have been hung. Some (though perhaps not all) of them could have had a secondary defensive function as well.

Such towers have been identified at Dunblane, Muthill, Dunning, Restenneth, Markinch, and St Andrews (St Rule's). The foundations of another have been identified under the nave of Dunfermline Abbey.<sup>1</sup> Although as a group they do not rival either the Irish round towers or late Anglo-Saxon square towers for quantity, they are well built and show the wealth and skill which was available to major Scottish churches in this area and period. Other major early church sites have prominent medieval towers (e.g. Dunkeld), and in some cases these may have replaced early Christian towers. At Brechin a big north-west tower has been built, which now complements the round tower south-west of the cathedral; perhaps the ultimate aim was either to demolish the round tower and replace it with a medieval square tower, or else to incorporate the round tower into a larger square tower.

Some of these towers have been fitted, sometimes rather clumsily, into later building schemes. At Dunning the tower has become the west tower of a large kirk by having had an acutely pointed gothic arch inserted into its east face to give access to the nave. At Restenneth the tower of c. 1100 is imperfectly aligned with

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<sup>1</sup> G Donaldson, "Scotland's earliest church buildings", in his *Scottish Church History* (Edinburgh, 1985), 1-10.

the medieval choir, with a thirteenth-century nave added to the west. At Dunblane, an apparently free-standing tower has been rather casually incorporated into the south wall of the thirteenth-century nave of the cathedral, where it abuts into the south aisle. At Muthill the west end of a medieval aisled nave has been “wrapped round” an earlier square tower.

The six surviving towers, and the foundations at Dunfermline, are similar in size.<sup>2</sup> Dunblane is the biggest in area, having sides with an external length of 6.7m (22 feet 6 inches), but it is not the highest; the early Christian portion now rises to about 16.85m (55 feet), with later medieval additions. Possibly it did not originally rise much higher, apart from a saddleback roof; the two-light openings in the topmost early Christian storey resemble those in the topmost storey of other towers, and presumably opened from the original bell-chamber, which one would expect occupied the uppermost storey.

Next in area comes St Rule’s kirk at St Andrews. It has sides with an external length of 5.8m (19 feet) and an internal length of 4.4m (14 feet 6 inches). But it is by some way the highest, having a height of nearly 33m (108 feet). It must once have been one of the most splendid buildings in all Scotland.

The others are more modest in size, though still impressive. Dunning has sides with an external length of nearly 5.5m (18 feet). Muthill has an external length of side of 4.7m (15 feet 4 inches), and a height of 15.5m (51 feet). Markinch has an external length of side of 4.5m (16 feet), and a height of 22.25m (73 feet). At Dunfermline, the foundations suggest an external length of side of 6.5m (22 feet), nearly as big as Dunblane, but with very thick walls; the internal length of the sides is 3.65m (12 feet). The height is unknown.

In addition to this general similarity of proportion, they have other features in common: Professor Donaldson has drawn attention to “the two-light windows or openings and the conspicuous external courses which mark off the storeys or stages”. There are no buttresses. In the case of all except the Fife examples (Markinch and St Rule’s)

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<sup>2</sup> All the dimensions that follow have been rounded to the nearest .05m. They are taken from the RCAHMS *Inventory of Stirlingshire* (Edinburgh, 1963) and *Inventory of Fife, Kinross and Clackmannan* (Edinburgh, 1933), from Donaldson, *Scottish Church History*, and from my own measurements.

the two-light windows are recessed within a single round arch; the details of the Fife examples are different from the others, “genuine twin openings... not recessed within a single arch”. The two-light windows at Dunblane and Dunning are strikingly alike, while at Muthill they are more deeply recessed within the outer arch.<sup>3</sup>

These kirks are also mostly documented as pre-Norman ecclesiastical sites: at Dunblane, there is mention of a *rex scholarum*, although by the early thirteenth century the kirk was said to be roofless and served only by a “rural chaplain”;<sup>4</sup> Muthill had a community of *Céli Dé* in the twelfth century, and may have served as the cathedral kirk of Strathearn before being supplanted by Dunblane in the thirteenth century.<sup>5</sup> St Andrews had bishops by the tenth century and abbots in the eighth.<sup>6</sup> Dunning figures prominently in the *vita* of St Serf,<sup>7</sup> and Restenneth in the lessons for St Boniface in the *Aberdeen Breviary*,<sup>8</sup> aside from its possible identification with King Nechton’s church of St Peter in the early eighth century.<sup>9</sup> Dunfermline was in existence by the time of Queen Margaret’s marriage there to Mael Coluim III in 1070.<sup>10</sup>

I would like to suggest a possible addition to our list of “pre-Norman” or “early Christian” square towers associated with major minster kirks in central Scotland. The original *clachan* or kirkton of Stirling was at St Ninians, some 2 km. south of the castle rock, and

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<sup>3</sup> Donaldson, *Scottish Church History*.

<sup>4</sup> *Chartulary of the Abbey of Lindores*, ed. J. Dowden (Edinburgh, 1903), 49; A. Theiner, *Vetera Monumenta* (Rome, 1874), no. 91.

<sup>5</sup> *Lindores Chartulary*, 50; *Carte Monialium de Northberwic*, ed. C. Innes (Edinburgh, 1847), 7; Cowan and Easson, *MRHS*, 204-5.

<sup>6</sup> *Annals of Ulster*, ed. W.M. Hennessy and B. MacCarthy (Dublin, 1887-1901), s.a. 747; Anderson, *Kings and Kingship in Early Scotland* (Edinburgh, 1974), 251; *Chron. Bower*, lib. vi, cap. 24 (ed. D.E.R. Watt, iii, 342-4).

<sup>7</sup> “*Vita Sancti Servani: the Life of St Serf*”, ed. A Macquarrie, *Innes Review*, xlv (1993), 122-52.

<sup>8</sup> *Aberdeen Breviary*, *Propria Sanctorum*, Pars Hiemalis, fo. lxix r.-lxx v.

<sup>9</sup> Bede, *HE*, v, 21. It was once widely accepted that the tower of c. 1100 stood on earlier footings; architectural historians nowadays, however, are less optimistic than formerly that the base of the tower could be 8th-century.

<sup>10</sup> Donaldson, *Scottish Church History*, 8.

known in the twelfth century as *Eggles*. As Professor Barrow has demonstrated, place-names incorporating British *eglwys* from late Latin *eclesia* are likely to be very early, possibly sixth-century, and to indicate the work of British rather than Gaelic missionaries.<sup>11</sup> Professor Duncan, following up this argument, has speculated that this is “the one dedication to St Ninian most likely to be ancient; since the rock of Stirling was probably a sub-Roman tribal *oppidum* the placing of a kirk at a distance of one and a half miles (2 km) from it is suggestive of the cautious acceptance of a new religion by a tribal king”.<sup>12</sup>

There is no physical evidence at St Ninians that it is quite so early, but there is evidence which does point to an early date, and a possible link with churches in south-west Scotland. On the south side of the kirkyard there is a cross-slab, 40cm (1 foot 4 in) high by 35cm (1 ft 2 in) broad, the cross having “wedge-shaped arms and a hollowed centre”.<sup>13</sup> “The stone resembles one from Hoddam which C.A. Raleigh Radford dated to the tenth or eleventh century.”<sup>14</sup> At the site now there is an empty space once occupied by a large nave (blown up by the Jacobites during the Prince’s retreat in February 1746) with more substantial ruins of a late medieval chancel to the east, and to the west of the nave a splendidly complete tower whose architectural details belong on the face of it to the early eighteenth century, but which bears some signs of greater age, and whose proportions are remarkably similar to those of our early group. The dimensions of the tower are as follows: external length of side: 4.5m (16 feet); height: about 18.5m (60 feet). It is now surmounted by a stone dome and cupola in “Palladian” style with a tall weathercock, and large stone urns at the

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<sup>11</sup> G.W.S. Barrow, “Pre-feudal Scotland: shires and thanes”, in *The Kingdom of the Scots* (London, 1973), 7-68; idem, “The Childhood of Scottish Christianity: a note on some place-name evidence”, *Scottish Studies*, xxvii (1983), 1-15.

<sup>12</sup> A.A.M. Duncan, *Scotland: the Making of the Kingdom* (Edinburgh, 1975), 39-40.

<sup>13</sup> RCAHMS, *Inventory of Stirlingshire*, i, 140-1, locates it “23 yards south-west of the buttress on the south side of the choir and eight yards north of the south boundary wall of the old churchyard”, and illustrates it on pl. 42B.

<sup>14</sup> RCAHMS, *Inventory of Stirlingshire*, i, 140-1, quoting *Transactions of the Dumfriesshire and Galloway Natural History and Antiquarian Society*, 3d ser. xxxi (1952-3), 190.



top of the tower at the four corners surrounding the dome. The tower is of four storeys, with prominent string-courses marking off each one. There are square-headed windows in the south and west faces of the two lower ones above the ground storey, and each face has a large round-headed belfry-opening at the top of the top storey; below these there is a large clock-face on three sides, the east face being the exception. The clock-face on the west side is of a different style from those on the north and south, and bears the date "1901". Apart from the rusticated-style quoins, blocks of dressed stone at the corners, most of the masonry consists of rubble and irregular roughly dressed stone, mostly yellow sandstone. At the north-west and south-west corners, the corner pointing extends from ground to top, whereas on the north-east and south-east corners it begins well above ground level, showing where the west gable of the now vanished nave abutted against the tower.

The east face, which was against the west wall of the nave, lacks the clock face and square windows of the south and east faces; but directly below the round opening in the bell-chamber it has a small oblong opening. Possibly the other three sides had such openings in their upper storey, now covered by their clock-faces. There are openings of similar shape and size in the three upper storeys of the north face, which are not placed centrally, but near the north-west corner. On the south face just above the first-storey eighteenth-century square window there is what appears to be an earlier lintel, and there are similar lintel-like stones at ground storey level on the north and west faces. These are probably not *in situ*, but may indicate the shape of window openings in an earlier tower. Small oblong openings can be seen at various points at Dunblane, Muthill and Dunning, placed both symmetrically and asymmetrically. A small oblong opening in the west face of the tower at Muthill is strikingly similar to those at St Ninians.

The present courses marking off the storeys, with their classical regularity, appear to be part of the eighteenth-century rebuilding. A fragment of an earlier course is visible at first storey level at the north-east corner. Just beside it in the north face, also at first-floor level and some 4m (13 feet) above the ground, is a blocked doorway. This has no parallels on any of the early Scottish square towers; Dunblane has a blocked doorway above ground level at the south corner of the west

wall, but it is not nearly so high off the ground. Dunblane also has a doorway, still in use, set within a round-headed arch in the north wall, which now opens into the nave; again it is not nearly so far above the present ground level. Brechin and Abernethy, the round towers, have doorways a few feet above ground level, but (except in Ireland) there is nothing so far above ground level as this. There is a record of the eighteenth-century masons building “a Stair to the wester loft” during the last months of 1734 because the existing one had been demolished “through the building of the Steeple”, and it may be that this doorway was a late insertion to give access to the west gallery.<sup>15</sup>

The present entrance to the tower is a “rusticated” round-headed eighteenth-century gateway in the south wall, but there are clear traces of a low debased pointed arch, late medieval in appearance, now blocked up, in the east wall, which would once have given access to the nave of the medieval church. At the apex it is only 1.52m (5 feet) in height above present ground level; it must have been much less impressive than the tower arch at Dunning, but was perhaps comparable with the opening in the east wall of the tower at Muthill, although lower. The use of the site of the nave for burials after its destruction in 1746 could have resulted in a raising of the ground level round the tower. This archway certainly looks like a medieval insertion.

The eighteenth-century reconstruction of the tower is partly documented in contemporary records, chiefly those of the kirk session of St Ninians. On 18 July 1734 the session clerk of St Ninians reported to the session that he had met with the heritors on 2 July and had served a writ for the acquisition of “that piece of Ground where the Foundation of the old Steeple is”, including the burial place of the Munros of Auchenbowie “contiguous to the West Gavil of the Church”, *i.e.*, within the tower.<sup>16</sup> The reason for this, as will shortly appear, was that the tower had collapsed and had damaged the west gable of the kirk. The contract for the rebuilding of the steeple was awarded to two local masons, Robert Henderson and Charles Bachop

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<sup>15</sup> Stirling Council Archives, St Ninians Kirk Session Minutes, CH 2/337/6, p. 31. 41-2, 45-6.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

of Stirling, on 15 August 1734.<sup>17</sup> Their fee for the work was the substantial sum of £100 Sterling, payable in three installments, at commencement, mid-point, and completion. They were to start work straight away, and “to have so much thereof done this present Year as will compleatly cover the west Gavell of [the] Kirk, which at present is open”. By 26 September work had begun, including the demolition of the stair to the west gallery, and by 26 December a new stair had been built.<sup>18</sup>

The expectation was that the work would be completed by 15 May 1735. On 26 February 1735 the session clerk reported that he had arranged for a carter “to carry the Big Stones for the foundation of the Steeple ... extending to twelve Cartfulls from the Blackcraig at 12s. per Cartfull and fourteen Cartfulls from William Andersons at Snabhead at 8s. per Cartfull...”<sup>19</sup>

I do not think, however, that we are to understand by this that entire new foundations were to be dug, since we have seen that the closing up of the west gable and the building of a new stair to the wester loft, probably involving the blocked-up door at first-storey level, were already complete by this time. So what exactly did Henderson and Bachop do? In the absence of heritors’ records for this period,<sup>20</sup> and in particular of “the Plan given in by them of the samen”, mentioned in the contract, it is difficult to know how far they incorporated the existing fabric into the new tower. The low pointed doorway in the east wall of the tower, the surviving base of a cylindrical pillar from the nave beside it, and the fragment of an old string-course at first storey level at the north-east corner all seem to indicate that in this area at least, where the masons were anxious to close in the damaged west gable quickly, some original masonry was incorporated *in situ*.

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<sup>17</sup> Stirling Council Archives, Stirling Burgh Records, Register of Deeds, B 66/9/17, 174-6. The contract is transcribed (with some inaccuracies) by W.B. Cook in two places: *Transactions of the Stirling Natural History and Archaeological Society*, 1902-1903 (1903), 118-20; and *The Stirling Antiquary*, 1903-1906 (1908), 46-8.

<sup>18</sup> Cf. n. 15 above.

<sup>19</sup> Stirling Council Archives, St Ninians Kirk Session Minutes, CH 2/337/6, 52.

<sup>20</sup> The Scottish Record Office holds heritors’ minute-books for St Ninians covering periods from 1773 to 1927, but not for the 1730s.

We cannot say the same with confidence for the rest of the tower. Henderson and Bachop were allowed “to make use of the Stones, Timber, and other Materialls of the old Steeple” in the rebuilding, but they also brought in twenty-six cartloads of big stones. These alone might hardly have been sufficient to build a tower sixteen feet square and sixty feet high. We have seen that there was an understanding, in the kirk session minutes for 18 July 1734, that the new steeple was to occupy the same area as the old one: “bounded with the throught Stane of the deceased James Wingate ... on the South, of the highway leading from the west porch through the Church yard west, and of Alexander Cowan ... on the North,” together with the burial place of the Munros of Auchenbowie “contiguous to the West Gavil of the Church”;<sup>21</sup> evidently the Munro burials were within the tower. A new burial aisle for the Munros of Auchenbowie was to be built to the west of the new tower, replacing their earlier burial place.<sup>22</sup> My view would be that the lower part of the east wall and adjacent north-east corner are the only area where earlier masonry is *in situ*, and that elsewhere Henderson and Bachop rebuilt from ground level, incorporating much of the rubble from the collapsed tower in the new one.

Evidently the building was not complete by the rather optimistic date of May 1735, but it was finished less than a year later. By March 1736 the kirk session was looking at ways to raise money to buy a clock for the steeple, and resorted to selling off the trees in the kirkyard.<sup>23</sup> On 1 April 1736 Munro of Auchenbowie told a presbytery visitation that his new burial aisle was complete.<sup>24</sup> On 4 June 1736 procurators for the masons registered their contract in the Stirling

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<sup>21</sup> Stirling Council Archives, St Ninians Kirk Session Minutes, CH 2/337/6, 24.

<sup>22</sup> On 1 April 1736 Mr Munro of Auchenbowie told a Stirling Presbytery visitation “that his burial place being exchanged at the desire of the Heritors for the convenience of building the Steeple, and that his new burial place is now finished, being surrounded with a stone wall on the west end of this said Steeple.” Stirling Council Archives, Stirling Presbytery Records, 1728-1738, CH 2/722/12, 282.

<sup>23</sup> Stirling Council Archives, St Ninians Kirk Session Minutes, CH 2/337/6, 118, 124. There are still a number of handsome yew trees in the kirkyard.

<sup>24</sup> Cf. n. 22 above.



burgh register – probably because having completed their work they were having difficulty getting final payment from the heritors.<sup>25</sup>

There is no doubt that the eighteenth-century restoration at St Ninians, while giving the tower a pleasing classical appearance, has incorporated parts of a much earlier tower and made it difficult to interpret. There is no reliable drawing of the earlier kirk of St Ninians. An estate map made for the Murrays of Polmaise, probably c. 1720, has a highly conventionalised representation of “St Ninians Kirk”, showing a single chamber with three round-headed windows on the south wall and a west tower with narrow windows on two storeys surmounted by a spire and cross,<sup>26</sup> but this is not reliable. St Ninians kirk had an aisled nave probably of six bays (possibly in date and scale similar to the nave at the Holy Rude Kirk at Stirling), with a narrow unaisled chancel to the east.<sup>27</sup> Sadly, this drawing is no evidence for the size and shape of the medieval tower at St Ninians.

But the documents do suggest that the present tower at St Ninians occupies the same space as its predecessor, and both they and the physical evidence indicate that it incorporates some earlier fabric. Because of the rebuilding of 1734-6, it is not immediately obviously an “early Christian” tower, like Dunblane, Muthill, Dunning, St Rule’s or Markinch. But in proportion it is similar to the others, especially to Muthill, Markinch and Dunning. The oblong opening under the belfry archway on the east face can be closely paralleled at Dunning, and to a lesser extent at Dunblane.

It is speculation, but not unreasonable supposition, that the present round-headed and shuttered openings on each side of the bell-chamber imitate earlier belfry openings. At Muthill the deeply-recessed archway on the west face is very similar in shape and size to the “classical” openings at St Ninians. Perhaps the original belfry

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<sup>25</sup> Cf. n. 17 above.

<sup>26</sup> Stirling Council Archives, Murray of Polmaise Estate Plans, RHP 3789. The date of this plan must be 1697 x 1746, since it shows Polmaise House, built in the former year, and the nave of St Ninian’s Kirk, destroyed in the latter. Probably it is earlier than 1734.

<sup>27</sup> Cf. the articles cited in n. 17 above, and RCAHMS, *Inventory of Stirlingshire*, i, 140-1. The cylindrical base of one of the piers of the nave, visible at the NW corner of the tower, is similar to the piers of the nave of Holy Rude Kirk.

windows at St Ninians may have been similar to the surviving belfry windows at Muthill.

The original roof or cap must also remain a subject for speculation, since no original finish has survived on any early round or square tower in Scotland. Perhaps it took the form of a stone saddle; it is believed that the crow-stepped gables at Dunning and Muthill replaced such roofs. The Murray of Polmaise estate map of c. 1720 shows a medieval spire, but this is so conventionalised that it is of doubtful value even as a contemporary record, and of no value at all for a much earlier period. The height of the earlier tower is also unknown, but again it might be not unreasonable to speculate that Henderson and Bachop suggested a height of 60 feet for the new tower in imitation of the height of the old.

The present tower at St Ninians is similar in shape and size to eleventh- or early twelfth-century church towers in east central Scotland. It occupies the site of, and incorporates some of the fabric of, an earlier tower of the same square area. Although its present appearance is Palladian, some of the surviving architectural details suggest a possible affinity with Dunblane, Muthill, and Dunning. The place-name Eccles is very ancient, and there is an early Christian (tenth- or eleventh-century) fragment in the kirkyard. All of these considerations justify the identification of the steeple and burial ground at St Ninians as the fragmentary remains of an early Scottish minster kirk. I am perhaps less optimistic than some about the antiquity and significance of the dedication of Kirkton of Stirling to St Ninian;<sup>28</sup> but I think we do have here signs of a pattern that is repeated elsewhere. At Glasgow, the ancient church of St Kentigern (d. probably c. 614) was sited some 4 km from a royal residence at Partick; above Abernethy rises a hill crowned with a hill-fort which was still in use in Pictish times; the church of *Cennrighmonadh* at St Andrews was near a royal residence or hunting lodge called *Muiccros*. These examples could be multiplied many times over. By examining the physical evidence on the ground and collating it with later but reliable documentary evidence (in this case the source is the rather

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<sup>28</sup> Cf. D. Brooke, *Wild Men and Holy Places* (1994), 23-4 and ff.; Duncan, *Making of the Kingdom*, 39-40.

severe kirk session records of eighteenth-century St Ninians), we can begin to build up a pattern of secular settlement and religious conversion.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> My thanks are due to the staff of Stirling Council Archives for their expertise and helpfulness while this research was in progress, in particular Dr John Brims, who has also corrected a number of errors. Such errors as remain are entirely my responsibility, as are the opinions expressed.

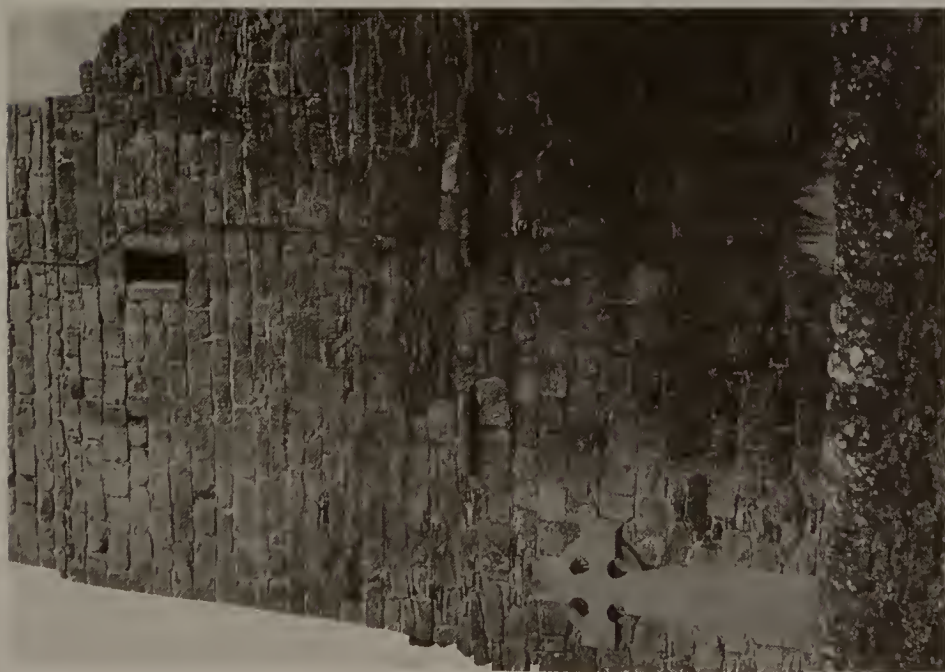


1. Dunning church tower



2. Muthill church tower





3. Muthill church tower, west face, showing oblong opening



4. St Ninians church tower and remains of chancel



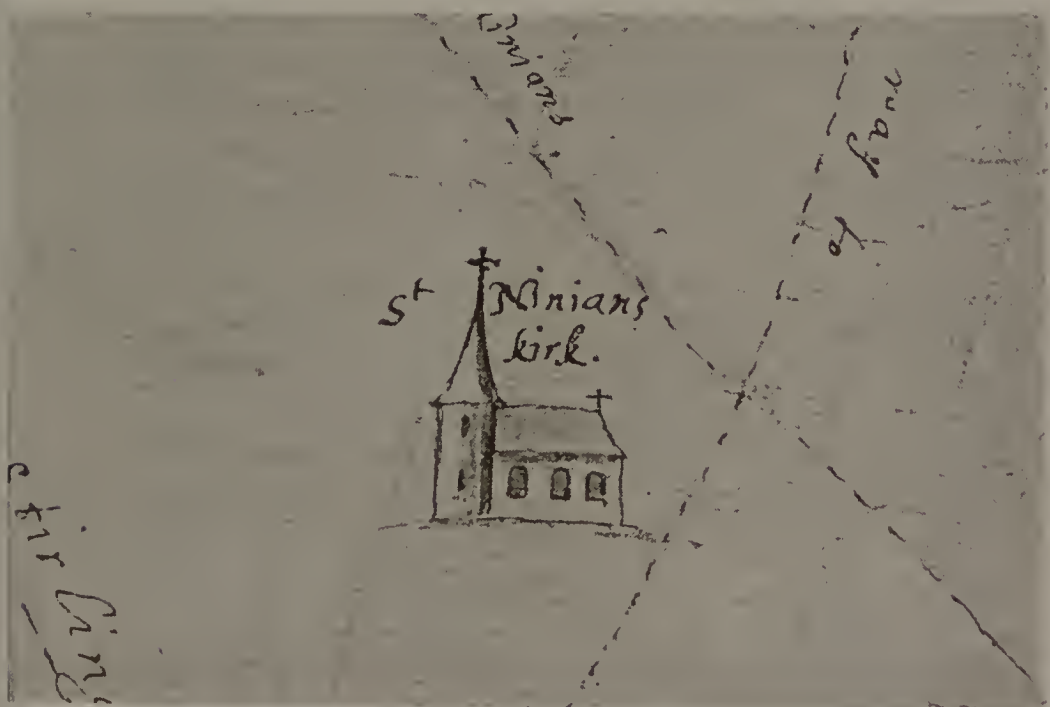
5. St Ninians church tower, east face, showing blocked-up pointed arch at foot



6. St Ninians church tower, north-east corner, showing earlier string-course and blocked-up doorway at first storey level



7. St Ninians; early Christian burial marker in churchyard



8. Late 17<sup>th</sup>- or early 18<sup>th</sup>-century estate plan with conventional representation of St Ninians kirk (Murray of Polmaise Estate Plans, RHP 3789, reproduced by courtesy of Stirling Council Archives)

